

# Tim Burton's Plan 9 From Burbank



Johnny Depp stars as the world's worst director, Ed Wood.

**Who would've guessed that director Tim Burton—Hollywood's wizard of odd—would have his nightmarish visions and least-commercial projects pursued and eventually produced by Disney Studios? Not even Ed Wood.**

By David Giammarco





he whole thing is just so surreal. Nothing surprises me now," laughs the droopy-eyed, wild-haired Tim

Burton on a weekend break from filming *Ed Wood*, his black-and-white biopic about 1950's schlock director/transvestite Ed Wood Jr., starring Johnny Depp.

The project Hollywood wouldn't touch was what Disney Studios used to lure Burton back to their brave new fold, along with the animated horror opera *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, which proved to be so anti-Disney that audiences just couldn't resist severed heads hung with care and the merciless torture of Santa Claus. Of course, 14 years ago, when Burton was the young animator suffering the assembly-line torment of drawing cutesy, bug-eyed animals, Disney was Burton's very own personal nightmare.

"It was a strange place at that time," recalls Burton, who was recruited by the studio at age 20 after attending CalArts' film school. "It was like being trapped in that TV show *The Prisoner*, where everybody's really nice and they smile...but it's like you can't leave. I was going crazy."

Frustrated by that old regime's "What would Walt have done?" attitude, Burton even participated in a failed séance to get the definitive answer from the deceased animation mogul himself. But Burton just couldn't adapt to the Disney style. His twisted and macabre drawings left the management dumfounded, "so they just put me in a room and told me to draw whatever I liked, do design work, and basically just let me run free. It was a very weird relationship, because on one hand they let me get away with murder, but on the other it was like 'Don't tell anybody!'"

"It was a time when Disney wasn't taking any risks," adds David Hoberman, president of Touchstone/Disney Pictures. "Everybody who worked there, the animators and the artists, saw in Tim someone really exciting. His ideas and drawings were marvelous, and it was like fresh air. But management at that time, which preceded the current management, was terrified of taking any risks. They had their animated films that all fit the formula. They weren't with the company to try anything new."

"The great thing about this kind of biopic is that you're not dealing with the well-documented life of Orson Welles."

-Tim Burton

Cut to 1994, and *Ed Wood* is certainly pushing even the existing Disney "formula" to the extremes. If a film about a Marine veteran turned director who parades around L.A. in lingerie, pumps and pearls and churned out such inept offerings as *Glen or Glenda*, *Plan 9 From Outer Space*, *Jailbait* and *Bride of the Monster* isn't making Walt turn over in his Frigidaire, nothing will.

"I really felt like Ed Wood myself trying to get this film made," confesses Burton, who originally had his pet project put into turnaround at Columbia. "It was such a weird time

with all that...it was like 'Look, do you want to do this or don't you want to do this?' There's so much baloney and spinning wheels in Hollywood. This has been the hardest project I've ever had to get going. And since Hollywood is so based on success, you'd think it would be a little easier. Especially since I'm doing this film for scale and it's the lowest-budgeted movie I've done in a long time. It's not like they're taking a gigantic risk here. And these are the same people that I've dealt with in the past, where things had worked out.

"It's all bizarre. I don't quite understand it. The least expensive movie was the hardest to get going. So what does that mean? I don't know. It's symbolic of a certain kind of perverse situation."

With a budget of a mere \$16 million, Disney is expecting big returns given the box-office potential of Burton, Depp and Bill Murray, who plays Bunny Breckenridge, Ed Wood's stock player who longs for a sex-change operation in Mexico.

"Bill fits into the whole makeshift atmosphere," laughs Burton. "He's very funny."

Burton says he envisioned Depp as Ed Wood from the very beginning because "I thought he would look good wearing certain clothes. He looks great. And it's funny," Burton continues, "but this second time working with him [*Edward Scissorhands* being the first], I now see how we connect. I like to work with people who are intuitive, who try to get what you say and you try to get what they say. It's the most open I've ever seen him. He's doing well."

Lensing *Ed Wood* entirely in black and white—which Burton insisted



Burton on the set of his  
NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS.





upon from the outset—has lent the film a “surreal” feel he says. “It’s so beautiful to shoot in black and white. There’s just so much stimulation. It’s very pleasing to the eye to see something like that on the screen.”

He says delving into Ed Wood’s seedier side has met with zero resistance from the studio, which left him alone to shape and mold this movie. “The great thing about this kind of biopic is that you’re not dealing with the well-documented life of Orson Welles,” says Burton. “These people were all so out of it. One person says this and another person says that. It’s all contradictory information. Which is actually great because I don’t have to worry about details here. You just try to capture a certain spirit and see what happens.”

So does Burton think that “World’s Worst Director” is a fair label for Wood?

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—Burton on getting Wood into production

“It’s a question of talent really,” Burton figures. “Who has talent, who doesn’t and what is talent? I don’t know. His films were always acknowledged as bad films, but there are lots of bad films, so why

are his so special? So is there some talent? I don’t know if there is an answer for it, but I think he probably deserves that label because it’s an acknowledgment of him in some way. I think he deserves not to go unnoticed. It’s better to be called something than nothing.”

With only two weeks left in the shoot, Burton says he and Depp are still shaping and exploring the character of Ed Wood. “There’s a purity to him and an impurity,” the director explains. “But hopefully by the time I finish I’ll have a grip on that.”

Doesn’t that make it tough for Depp, not knowing if he’s in a comedy or a drama?

“No, he’s doing fine,” laughs Burton. “Everybody’s getting into the spirit of it. We’ll see what the flavor of the thing is. I’m still not sure yet. It’s hard to say how it will turn out—much like an Ed Wood movie.” 🎬

Burton toys with his NIGHTMARE creations.

